

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



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an injury to one is an injury to all

VICTORY FOR THE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS!

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CALIFORNIA GOES BUST CENTRE PAGES



MICHAEL JACKSON PAGE 11



BNP plans to celebrate JOIN THE PROTEST



BY CHARLIE SALMON

The election of two British National Party fascists to the European Parliament was not just a symbolic victory for reactionary ideas and organisation in this country. The victories of Nick Griffin and Andrew Brons have given a massive boost in confidence, prestige and — importantly — money to the BNP.

Nationwide the BNP won 943,598 votes or 6.2% of the vote. Election after election, the BNP are winning more support, more votes at the ballot box. Add on the votes for other parties to the right of the Tories (UKIP, for example) and the total “far right” vote increases to around 23% — or almost a quarter of all voters.

A YouGov poll conducted after the latest election shows that 87% of BNP supporters consider immigration to be the number one issue facing the country. 94% of them think all immigration should be stopped. 74% feel they don't have enough money to live on and 57% think the Labour Party no longer represents their interests.

Anti-fascists and the broad labour movement need to digest the meaning of this data and face the burgeoning realities of the political landscape: The combined far-right vote is increasing and the Tories look set to win the next election; a vote for the BNP or UKIP is not simply a “protest” against Labour, but an expression of anti-immigrant and racist thinking; the economic crisis and the manifold betrayals and attacks on the working class by this government have left people desperate and disenchanted.

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DEMONSTRATE AGAINST BNP “SUMMER FESTIVAL”

15 AUGUST, CODNOR, DERBYSHIRE

NEW LABOUR

Brown “re-positions” Labour

BY MARTIN THOMAS

If Gordon Brown wanted to find measures which would increase Labour support, but would not worsen the Government's huge budget-deficit problems, there are a few obvious ones.

He could have undertaken to repeal the anti-union laws carried forward from the Thatcher government, and replace them by a charter of workers' rights.

He could have cancelled the Trident replacement, and withdrawn troops from Afghanistan.

He could have stopped the vast pay-outs from central government on contracts for private “management consultants”. In April such contracts advertised for tender totalled £4 billion.

Going further, he could have — or, at least, a different sort of government facing a budget crisis could have — fully nationalised the whole of high finance, with compensation only for small shareholders, and turned it into a public service for banking, insurance, and pensions oriented to fund jobs and services. He could have nationalised the contractors receiving PFI pay-outs and stopped the outflow of PFI money.

He didn't do any of that. In “Building Britain's Future” and other recent gov-

ernment announcements he tried to “re-position” Labour for the coming general election by other concessions.

The government has in effect accepted the “Fourth Option” for council housing long campaigned for by many and demanded by Labour Party conference since 2005.

Previously, all housing investment by local government was conditional on either transfer of housing stock to the private sector, PFI, or “arm's length management”. Now direct investment is allowed. Also, councils can keep rent and right-to-buy sales income to use it for their housing expenditure, rather than having to pass it on to central government and then get bits of it back.

However, little central government money has been promised to go into housing, so this shift means little in immediate terms of new council housing becoming available.

The Government has backed down on Royal Mail privatisation; but only by “postponing” it, not by financing a deal for postal workers' pensions based on making the post a public service.

It has renationalised East Coast mainline trains, but only as a temporary measure until a new contractor can be found.

It has backed down on ID cards, and especially on schemes opposed by the

unions to impose ID cards soon on airport workers. It has scrapped the system of “targets” to regulate public services, promising to replace them by a system of guaranteed rights for service-users.

There is no evidence yet of the “re-positioning” winning over people fed up with New Labour. The broadly pro-Labour *Guardian* commented: “desperate... mishmash”; “flammed-up nonsense”; “muddled... exercise”; shows “emerging fault-line at the top of the government”.

John McDonnell, on the Labour left, said: “Yet another political disaster”, “stale”, “undeliverable”.

The *Financial Times*, representing conservative opinion which just might back Labour (as the *FT* did in 2005), quoted a civil servant: “nobody took the exercise seriously”; and a former Labour cabinet minister: “It doesn't matter... no-one is listening to us: the public hate us”.

Brown's broad pitch of “Labour investment versus Tory cuts” in in trouble because he lacks credibility.

He has little option now, however, but to plough on with that line, and hope it gains some traction, that alarm at coming Tory cuts will cut into accumulated disillusion with New Labour.

The new message also “positions” Labour for its future stance in opposition to a probable Tory government.

More houses for all, not “locals” vs migrants!

Among the Labour government's new announcements is that it will “enable local authorities to give more priority to local people” on council-house waiting lists.

This populist ploy echoes the notorious “sons and daughters” policy of the Liberal council in Tower Hamlets in the 1990s, which solves no housing problems but served only to point the finger of blame for mammoth waiting lists at immigrants. It is doubly dangerous at a time when the BNP and UKIP are growing.

As the “Defend Council Housing” campaign says, “A massive programme of new council housing is the answer... not to pit those on the waiting list against each other”.

EDUCATION

Education White Paper: the teacher's MOT

BY PATRICK MURPHY, NUT EXEC

According to the Teacher Development Agency (a quango overseeing teacher recruitment and training), over 50% of all newly qualified teachers will have left the job within three years. And this does not reveal the real drop-out rate from teacher-training. Substantial numbers leave before completing their courses, and yet more finish training and then decide against a career in teaching.

How do the government's latest education proposals propose to deal with this? Bizarrely, they have decided to make it even more difficult to retain teachers and even more likely that people will decide to leave.

A key proposal in the White Paper ‘Building a 21st Century Schools System’ is the introduction of a renewable “licence to teach”. According to the White Paper “this will mean that every teacher will need to keep their skills up to date and demonstrate periodically that their professional practice and development meets the standards required for the profession”.

Teachers in England are already some of the most monitored, checked and inspected workers in the world. We have a rigorous performance management system linked to pay. There is an upper pay spine which can only be accessed by

people who demonstrate the up-to-date skills referred to in the government's proposals. We have Ofsted regularly inspecting schools and grading individual lessons and we have league tables to measure school against school. There has also been an exponential growth in so-called capability cases taken against teachers deemed to be failing.

The plan is to begin by imposing the licence to teach on newly qualified staff and those returning to teach after time out. So, after a three-year degree and a one-year training degree (PCGE), the newly qualified teacher will need to pass an induction year (as now) and then prove that they deserve to continue to teach after five years and then every five years after that.

The absurdity is underlined by the fact that younger teachers become eligible for the threshold to the upper pay spine after about five years and that process assesses the very same skills and experience that this licence appears to test.

So why are they doing this? One major reason for Labour's education “reforms” is so that they can be seen to be doing something. Government proposals, press releases and White Papers partly aim at sending a message to voters: “we will not accept low standards for your children, we will insist on the best”.

Another factor is blame. If Labour are faced with evidence that standards have not risen sufficiently or that too many children are failing they want to be able

to point to a thick pile of initiatives to prove that, whoever else is responsible for this, it cannot be them. It must be failing teachers, or soft Heads and governors who won't sack failing teachers, or local authorities who fail to challenge schools enough on teaching standards, or, maybe, feckless parents.

Whatever else this initiative is, it is not a recipe for improving education and schools. There is widespread consensus on the measures needed to do that: smaller class sizes, a qualified teacher in every class, secondary teachers in every subject who are qualified in that subject, trained and properly paid support staff, especially for children with special educational needs, well-resourced schools in every area with a balanced comprehensive intake.

No trust in the Goldsmiths Trust! Defend accountable, state education!

Campaigners in Lewisham, south London, are organising to prevent a planned super-trust involving Deptford Green and Addeys and Standhope schools, Crossways Sixth Form and Goldsmiths University. The plans have gone out to initial consultation, ending 21 July, with a view to a fuller consulta-

tion in September. Campaigners have held a well-attended public meeting and are leafleting outside schools. They oppose the Trust plan because it could involve private “partners” in the running of schools. The Trust would become the employer of teachers, not the council, and could set its own admissions arrangements.

The fact that almost everyone who works in education knows that this kind of programme would work counts for nothing when weighed against New Labour's refusal to put social need and equality before privilege and wealth.

And one last piece of evidence that this is a means of bashing schools and teachers rather than serious education reform. There will be one category of state-funded school in which teachers will be exempt from this MOT idea. Yes, you've guessed it. Academies.

tion in September.

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The campaign is supported by Lewisham ATL, NASUWT, NUT, GMB, Unison, Goldsmiths UCU, Goldsmiths students union, Defend Education in Lewisham, and Hands off Lewisham Bridge.

ENGINEERING CONSTRUCTION

Solidarity can change the world!

At 8am on Friday 26 June Unite rep Tony Fields said to the meeting of 400 maintenance engineers at Stanlow oil refinery, “Well, that’s it, lads. It’s done, we’ve won. What do you want to do? Go back today or go back on Monday when the Lindsey refinery workers go back?”

We’ll go back Monday, they said. And that was it. “That’s what happens when you get solidarity”, one worker said.

And indeed it is.

Lindsey Oil Refinery construction workers have won their dispute. All the workers’ demands have been met. It is a victory against Total who thought they could sack workers who dared to take industrial action. The 647 dismissals have been withdrawn, the 51 redundancies rescinded, and all employees have been guaranteed a minimum of four week’s work.

This dispute has important lessons for us all.

SOLIDARITY

This victory has been achieved by the militancy and determination of 1,200 LOR workers taking unofficial strike action and the solidarity of more than 4,000 workers at 30 other sites, including power stations and petrochemical plants.* In engineering construction, as in any other industry, the bosses are paralysed if the whole workforce sticks together.

If we limit ourselves to action by individual groups on particular group interests, the bosses are always lable to bring in other workers to undercut each group. With solidarity, they can’t do that. Once the practice and the effectiveness of solidarity is established, it is a principle that can not only win industrial disputes but can change the world.

THE ANTI-TRADE UNION LAWS

Although anti-trade union laws introduced by the Tories in the 1980s and 90s never suppressed illegal strikes or solidarity completely, they have been used by the employers under the Tories and Labour to intimidate and frighten workers and to stop industrial action.

The trade union bureaucracy have used them as a reason to stymie and refuse to initiate strike action.

In this dispute the anti trade union laws were broken, and no action was taken by the employer or government to enforce them. It shows that the way to defend workers’ pay and conditions is to take whatever action is required — you ignore the law.

The solidarity strike wave that started on 19 June is bigger than anything we have seen for many years. It has shown that all-out solidarity action organised quickly is the most effective weapon our class has against the bosses. The show of strength and the refusal to be frightened by the threat of redundancy has demonstrated to the working class that there is an alternative to accepting pay cuts and attacks on conditions — an alternative that wins.

CHANGING THE UNIONS

Because the action was solid and strong it forced the trade union leaders to back the action. That in turn gave further confidence to the strikers.

The full-time officials of GMB and Unite, while repudiating the unofficial action, were forced to back the workers openly, once the 647 were dismissed. The fact that the action was unofficial *and* determined meant that it would have been difficult for the union leaders to derail the dispute.

On its website the GMB takes credit for the victory! Not quite true, but General Secretary Paul Kenny gave full support, spoke at rallies etc., and as the union says that international support from trade unions at other Total plants was important.

The Unite website says little, but GMB and Unite stewards were working together, and it was the union officials who did the negotiating.

But, and this is the point, the unions behaved as they

Victory achieved by militancy and determination

did because of rank and file pressure, and that pressure can shape what the union leaderships do both industrially and politically.

RANK AND FILE CONTROL

The role of the shop stewards and strike committees, and the links between rank and file workers who were in touch by mobile phone was crucial.

Rank and file co-ordination is an effective way to organise action and it means that decisions are taken democratically. Mass meetings made the decisions on what to do next. The decision making process lay outside of the control of the union and in the hands of the workers.

All of this makes it difficult for the trade union leadership to take decisions that the workers disagree with. It shows why rank-and-file organisations across the trade union movement are necessary.

TACKLING RACISM

Rank-and-file control, mass meetings and workplace democracy help the work of left-wing stewards and socialists, to fight divisive and poisonous role backward looking ideas such as sexism, racism and nationalism play in the working-class.

They are able to argue directly with those who have racist and nationalistic views like those expressed in the “British jobs for British workers” slogans.

Those views can be tackled head on — we cannot pretend they don’t exist. When workers are engaged in a struggle, all kinds of ideas and ruling class ideology are questioned — and in such a situation, sexism, racism and other similar ideas can be changed. That happened in this dispute. For instance a discussion took place about chasing the BNP off the site if they came. The workers could see the importance of getting support from other workers and why that meant the BNP must be kept away.

In disputes like this that you can see why Marx argued that class struggle is not only necessary to beat the bosses but it is also necessary to make the working class *fit to govern*.

In bigger struggles, over time, the ideas of thousands

of people can begin to open up to new possibilities — they see society does not have to be organised in the way it is. By intervening in these struggles socialists, with an overview of how and why the world is organised as it is, can influence the sort of society the working class fights for.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES, THE FUTURE

The dispute could have escalated. For example, at Stanlow there were other workers who had said that they wanted to come out and if the dispute had continued they would have come out.

The employers could have tried to use the anti-trade union laws and continued the lockout but that would have risked them being unable to carry out other contracts. For example, at Stanlow a maintenance contract employing 3,000 men is set to start at Christmas, and they need the skilled workers from Lindsey to complete it.

These workers are skilled. Much as the employers want to break their pay and conditions agreements, retraining thousands of other people would be expensive and take a long time.

The bosses and government could have decided that to allow any victory at a time when they want to make massive cuts was too much of a risk and the strike needed to be stopped. Then this dispute would have become an issue for the broader trade union movement. Other workers would have had to decide whether to back and spread the action.

There is another dispute looming in the industry, and these issues may well be raised again. The broad labour movement has to prepare itself now for that possibility. The employers still have their sights set on breaking national agreements and the trade unions. A national ballot, organised by both the GMB and Unite unions, is planned, taking up the employers’ refusal to make a pay offer or give any guarantees of employment security in the review of the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry for 2010.

The employers and the government now know that if they don’t concede, engineering construction workers will strike. The union leaders too realise they risk losing the confidence of a militant group of workers if they try to sell them short.

WORKING CLASS CONFIDENCE

The history of working-class struggle shows again and again that if the organisations of the best-placed sections of the working class are broken — as they were among miners, print workers, and dockers during in the 1980s — then the weaker and organised sections of the working class suffer too, and probably even more.

This is because strong solidarity action is curtailed and “markers”, consolidated wage rates and working conditions which can pull uppay and conditions for everyone are destroyed.

But each time a battle is won, it sets an example to the whole movement. It shows that if you fight you can win; that solidarity works; and that through it we can begin to reshape the whole of society and protect those who are unable to take effective trade union action. It is possible for the working class to begin to reverse the defeats of the last 20 years. The success of the construction workers’ dispute can demonstrate to the working class that it’s possible to stop the bosses as they try and make us pay for their crisis. It is an important victory. We should do everything we can to ensure that message is spread more widely.

* Figures come from a *Guardian* report, which said over 3,000 at nine sites, and the Socialist Party, which said solidarity at 30 plants. One of the biggest walkouts on Monday was at Sellafeld, where 900 contract staff decided to stay out until Tuesday. Other sites hit by unofficial strikes included the Ensus biofuels plant in Wilton, Teesside; ConocoPhillips’ Humber refinery; two gas plants in west Wales; Aberthaw power station in south Wales; Drax and Eggborough power stations near Selby, North Yorkshire; Fiddlers Ferry power station in Widnes, Cheshire; at Shell’s Stanlow refinery in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire; and Didcot power station in Oxfordshire.

RMT AGM

Top table wins on all the issues

BY JANINE BOOTH, LONDON
TRANSPORT REGION DELEGATE

Rail and transport union RMT held its annual general meeting from 28 June to 2 July, against a backdrop of employers attacking jobs and conditions across the industry.

The AGM was unanimously determined to resist these attacks. However, thousands of job cuts are going ahead, several strike ballots have been voted down, and it was not entirely clear how the union plans to turn this situation around.

Six years on from its foundation, Network Rail has still failed to harmonise the terms and conditions of workers who came to it from various contractor companies, and RMT members overwhelmingly defeated its latest harmonisation proposals in a recent referendum.

Rank-and-file members are critical of union's campaign on this issue to date, and a resolution from the North East Region sought a guarantee that RMT would not agree harmonisation or restructuring proposals, in any company, that left any members worse off. This seemed to me a basic principle — workers do not join a union for it to negotiate a worsening of their working conditions, nor to allow employers to play off one group of workers against another. However, the majority of delegates were persuaded that the resolution would "tie the hands" of the Executive, and voted it down.

Delegates gave a retrospective endorsement to the "No2EU — Yes to Democracy" election campaign, passing a resolution from the Executive approving "No2EU" and resolving to organise a conference later this year to plan future electoral challenges. As I disagreed with the first of these but agreed with the second, I abstained, as did two other delegates, the rest voting in favour. However, several supporters of the resolution criticised the name "No2EU" and the lack of consultation with branches and members, largely supporting "No2EU" because they thought it better than doing nothing and gave them something to vote for.

Not a single delegate defended the Labour Party. Later in the week the AGM enthusiastically welcomed John

The rail union AGM retrospectively backed "No2EU"

McDonnell's parliamentary report.

The AGM passed a resolution on Venezuela, with the standard left line of support for president Hugo Chavez — but delegates made some critical comments during the debate. Disappointingly, the AGM voted for a boycott of Israeli goods, overturning RMT's "solidarity not boycott" policy. In this debate, Bob Crow broke the union's rule that the General Secretary should defend existing RMT policy, instead giving a tubthumping speech for the boycott — earning himself a reprimand from the President, but only after it was too late to affect the outcome.

RMT's AGM is different from many other unions' conferences, as it has fewer than seventy delegates. The advantage of this is that everyone gets to speak on whatever issue they want to. But the disadvantage is that big sections of the membership are not represented.

While the structures do not prevent delegates criticising the leadership, I feel that aspects of the AGM's culture suppressed criticism. We have a dominant General Secretary with a big personality, impressive speaking style and a decent (though flawed) record of standing up for members. This — together with a powerful desire for unity, for huddling together against the storm of the employers' attacks — can quieten dissent even if the structures do not.

The "top table" got their way on everything, all week. That alone should set alarm bells ringing.

• RMT AGM voted to scheduled an open conference, non-motions-based, non-binding, later this year on the follow-up to No2EU.

An article in the *Morning Star* on 8 June by Rob Griffiths, secretary of the Communist Party of Britain, the main movers in No2EU, gives some hints on the shape of this.

"Trying to prevent... Tory victory will require a vote for hundreds of Labour candidates. Campaigning for those who are socialist and social-democratic, and who opposed new Labour's imperialist wars and backed the Trade Union Freedom Bill, should meet with wide-scale agreement on the left. In other seats, the Labour candidate may be best placed to keep out the Tories and — except for the worst of new Labour's privatising war criminals — (s)he could be supported. The question, then, is whether sections of the left and the labour movement can unite around candidates who will put the case for public ownership, economic planning, progressive taxation, investment in manufacturing and public services, defence of democratic rights and opposition to racism, the fascists, EU neoliberalism, militarism and imperialist war..."

subterranean tensions between ethnic and national groups to build a political base. This resulted in mass racist attacks, the further destruction of solidarity and in some cases widespread ethnic cleansing and war. Today, fascist and right-wing parties enjoy significant popular support and wield real political influence.

We do not face the same situation in Britain but we can see the similarities: the discrediting of the traditional party of the working class and "socialism", a crisis wracked economy, pervasive anti-immigrant and nationalistic ideas, the expression of real racist sentiment at the ballot box and on the streets. The BNP

Posties plan action on 17 July

Postal workers in the CWU post and telecom union will strike in London on 8-10 July over job cuts.

CWU says: "Strike action is spread over three days with a rolling 24 hour set of strikes on Wednesday 8, Thursday 9 and Friday 10 July. Delivery workers will be striking on Wednesday, distribution and logistics staff will be out on Thursday, and mail centres will be striking on Friday".

Dave Ward, CWU deputy general secretary, added: "We'll be holding a national day of action on Friday 17 July which will combine industrial action and demonstrations".

A CWU activist told *Solidarity*:

"Scores of other offices and mail centres all across the country are requesting industrial action ballots on similar grounds. There's concern in the union about whether we could pull off a national ballot on action, so at present the national strategy is to encourage more units to hold ballots for action, but strike action will escalate".

Business minister Peter Mandelson has made a point of signalling that the Government's retreat on post privatisation does not mean a pro-union stance by blaming CWU for failure to "modernise" and saying no progress is possible "until the CWU's attitude to change changes... that's the bottom line".

New anti-fascist push in Sheffield

BY SHEFFIELD WORKERS' LIBERTY

Over 30 people — mainly local workers but also some school and university students — attended a meeting on 2 July called by the Sheffield Department for Work and Pensions branch of the PCS trade union to discuss working-class anti-fascist campaigning.

The meeting had the support of individuals in other unions such as Unite, UCU, and GMB, because of the frustration of many of their activists at the failure of mainstream anti-fascism (expressed through campaigns such as UAF and Hope Not Hate/*Searchlight*) to develop a working-class perspective that can cut the roots of fascism, rather than just exhorting people to vote for anyone but the BNP (which necessarily means voting for the very same capitalist parties whose policies have allowed the BNP to grow).

There was universal agreement that effective anti-fascist campaigning had to have a working-class political programme that could counter the BNP's exploitation of legitimate working-class grievances around issues like jobs and services. Whilst stressing the need for unity with activists currently organised in campaigns like UAF, many speakers also emphasised how refreshing it was to attend an anti-fascist meeting that was based on a real, open and inclusive discussion about which tactics and political perspectives are effective — rather than a top-down rally dominated by celebrities, religious leaders and trade union

bureaucrats.

The meeting agreed to attempt to make contacts with workers in Southey and Firth Park — the areas of Sheffield the BNP targets most heavily — and aim for a public meeting in one of these areas, as well as to mobilise for the upcoming demonstration against the BNP's Red, White and Blue festival. An organising meeting was scheduled for Thursday 23 July.

• For more information on the campaign, email maxdbass@yahoo.co.uk.

Nortel sackings

More redundancies are expected in coming weeks from the big telecommunications equipment manufacturer Nortel.

All Nortel workers have been left in a precarious position, unsure whether they will keep their jobs from one day to the next. In early July, redundancies were made in addition to 228 imposed back in March. The company, which filed for "Chapter Eleven" bankruptcy protection from its U.S. creditors in January, says that all company pensions have been lost.

The company has sold its assets, in lucrative packages, to the Israeli technology firm Radwar and to Noki Siemens Networks — and yet says there is no money for redundancy pay!

Sign the "Abuse of Nortel Workers' Rights" petition: www.ipetitions.com/petition/AbuseofNortelworkersrights/

organise politically but we also need to perform a basic job: to knock some of the confidence out of the BNP and their supporters.

The first big opportunity to do this is on 15 August when anti-fascists from Nottingham, Derby and Amber Valley have called a national demonstration against the BNP's "Red, White and Blue" summer festival.

We need the biggest possible turnout to demonstrate that in the face of the fascists' attempts to undermine it, working class unity and solidarity — across racial, ethnic and sexual lines — is still a force to be contended with.

15 August

From front page

If the left understands how the political picture is changing, we can be sure that the right wing and the fascists have some feel for it too.

In Eastern Europe racist, nationalistic and xenophobic ideas received a massive boost in the wake of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. "Socialism" was discredited and the far-right exploited

EDUCATION

Tower Hamlets fights ESOL cuts

BY A TRAINEE ESOL TEACHER

Another half-day strike is set for the afternoon of Thursday 9 July against the cuts to the teaching of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in Tower Hamlets, east London.

Demonstrators will march to the London Assembly to lobby the London mayor Boris Johnson.

The cuts initially proposed by new principal Michael Farley would lead to ESOL teaching being cut in half. 50% of students would lose classes, and up to 60 teachers lose their jobs.

The fightback against this so far has been inspiring, involving demos, walk-outs, strikes, students and mobilisation of the community. That this is seen as a sexist and racist attack is clear in messages on the placards and letters from students.

On Monday 6 July the teachers organised non-compliance with a compulsory Continuing Professional Development session that disrupted the session so much that it had to be abandoned.

On Tuesday 7 July a big demonstration was organised outside a governors

meeting. Two UCU union representatives went into the meeting to talk to the governors.

There was a half-day strike on Friday 3 July. The college term ends on 10 July, by which time the college's plans should be clear and individual teachers should know whether they are due to lose their jobs. There are plans to ballot for strike action to take place in September if the job cuts go ahead.

Tower Hamlets College is making a profit, but even if it weren't, ESOL provision is something that must be defended up and down the country, where it is under threat everywhere. It helps some of the poorest and most isolated people in the country to improve their English language skills and access vital services.

Please send letters of protest to Michael Farley, Principal, Tower Hamlets College, Poplar High Street, London E14 0AF.

Email messages of support to the unions: UCU Branch Chair Poplar (14-19) alison.lord@tower.ac.uk; UCU Branch Secretary (adult) John.Budis@tower.ac.uk; Unison: kathy.harriott@tower.ac.uk and rashid.igbal@tower.ac.uk. Join the Facebook group "Tower Hamlets College – Stop the Cuts".

"I'm the Branch Secretary of Morley College, which is in Lambeth, I'm also an ESOL teacher there.

We're facing quite substantial cuts and fee increases which is undoubtedly going to reduce the number of students and the general ESOL provision in our college. It is happening in every other college. Tower Hamlets is experiencing the most drastic cuts of all the London colleges, along with Hackney College.

We need to do as much as we can to fight these cuts, we cannot be allowed to be picked off one by one. We need to show solidarity both today and in general.

As you can see this is a very mixed community here in Tower Hamlets, as it is in most inner city boroughs where this is happening. It's going to affect people's ability to get on. Tower Hamlets [UCU] have done really well to get people down here at such short notice. We need to make sure it's just the beginning."

John, speaking on the Friday 26 June demonstration against cuts in Tower Hamlets

Fighting a racist and sexist attack

Victory on cuts

Parents at Brooke Primary School, in Hackney, East London, have won their campaign against cuts at the school.

Hackney Learning Trust, the contractor which runs Hackney's schools, had said that £75,000 must be cut, trashing the school's Numeracy and Reading Recovery provision.

After the campaign, the Learning Trust has "found" some extra money, and the cuts have been stopped.

Reoccupied to stop closure

On Friday 26 June parents of pupils attending Wyndford Primary School in Glasgow re-occupied the school in protest at Glasgow City Council's plans to press ahead with its closure.

The school had already been occupied by parents throughout the Easter school holidays in the run-up to a vote by the City Council on 23rd April on proposals to shut down a total of 13 primary schools and 11 nurseries.

At its April meeting the Council voted to axe 12 primary schools, including Wyndford, and nine nurseries. With the vote over and done with, the councillors must have assumed that was the end of the matter.

They were wrong.

On the last day of the summer term Wyndford was re-occupied, with parents pledging to remain in the school indefinitely – in order to prevent its demolition, and to force the Council to reverse its decision.

Over the first weekend following the start of the occupation parents scored a victory when contractors sent in by the Council to empty the school buildings left empty-handed. Parents formed a picket line across the school entrance and allowed out the contractors' vans

only after they had checked that they were empty.

On the Monday of the same week two vans turned up to pick up the school safe and photocopier. But parents at the gates sat down on the road in front of the vans, again forcing their drivers to leave empty-handed.

The response from the City Council has not been to meet with the parents – something they have generally avoided ever since the closure was first proposed – but to dismiss the occupation as irrelevant on the grounds that the Council's decision was final.

The school is one of the few remaining community facilities in Wyndford, whereas the school which children are expected to start attending in August is over a mile away and the route to it means walking along dangerous roads. This underlines the case for keeping Wyndford open.

More: Nikki Rathmill (07894 123 721) or Wyndford mobile (07783 508 740; 07770 806.270), or <http://sosglasgow.wordpress.com>.

St Paul's Way

Members of the National Union of Teachers at St Paul's Way school in East London were due to strike on 9 July, but had support withdrawn by the union's Action Committee just two days before.

Ammar Al-Ghabban, the NUT union rep at the school, says: "We have been sold out... Unofficial action is something we will now have to consider".

Al-Ghabban is calling for other NUT groups and branches to send messages to the Action Committee condemning its decision and calling on it to reinstate support for strikes, and to the school NUT group at alg@stpaulsway.org.

The strike was against job cuts. School management had announced they would make 15 teachers redundant this term. Since then over a dozen teachers have been pushed into taking voluntary redundancy.

The Local Education Authority still

wanted to cut four or five more teachers. After talks they agreed to delay the redundancy notices by one term.

The school NUT group considered this mere "stay of execution" woefully inadequate, and voted unanimously to go ahead with the strike. But the Action Committee thought the concession sufficient, and refused to respect the members' decision.

Haggerston strike

Members of the National Union of Teachers at Haggerston School in Hackney are to strike on Thursday 9 July against proposed redundancies.

This follows an outstanding ballot result — 37 ballot papers issued, 37 returned. 36 in favour of discontinuous strike action, one against.

Eleven teachers at the school — including Heads of Year, Heads of Faculty, SEN and EAL teachers — have been told they could be made redundant. Under a new management structure 13 posts have been deleted. Overall next year there will be 12 fewer teaching posts in the school.

Teachers at the school have been told they are not allowed to discuss the plan with parents or with pupils.

The governors are attempting to justify their decision by saying there are fewer pupils applying to come to the school.

Messages of support to kateford@haggerston.hackney.sch.uk

Reclaiming your taxes

Squatters have occupied the empty "main home" of Labour MPs Ann and Alan Keen. The house is in Ann

Keen's Brentford and Isleworth constituency.

The local council has been investigating why the house has been allowed to fall into disrepair, while the Keens lived in their second home close to Parliament. The Keens have claimed almost £140,000 over four years in expenses for their "second home".

The squatters have hung banners out of the windows which say "Reclaiming Your Taxes" and "500,000 homeless — One million empty homes".

On Friday 3 July comedians staged a benefit gig in the house, with proceeds going to victims of war; topping the bill was Mark Thomas.

On Friday 10 July the Keens will seek a repossession order in Brentford magistrates court. The occupiers are calling for a demonstration outside the courthouse.

Glasgow strike suspended

All-out indefinite strike action by some 450 frontline admin and clerical staff employed by Glasgow City Council Social Work Department (SWD), due to start on 1 July, was called off at the last minute.

The dispute centred on the demand that the workers be awarded a "working context and demands payment" under a new pay and grading scheme.

These payments, worth between £520 and £1,000 a year, can be paid where work involves potentially higher than normal health and safety risks, or dealing with people who are distressed or vulnerable.

On the eve of the scheduled strike action the City Council offered frontline staff an additional payment of £520 a year, backdated to 1 April 2009. A mass meeting UNISON members held the same day voted 213 to 103 to suspend the strike action and accept the offer in principle.

But the Council's definition of "frontline" is unclear. The details of the offer are yet to be finalised.

What happened in Iran?

Now the street mobilisations in Iran have ended, at least for now, how should socialists assess what happened? Here we print the reflections of an Iranian student activist now living in England.

People choose from the available alternatives to improve their daily life. For some people Mousavi represents the stream able to attain that. If in Iranian political life a better choice emerges, they might converge on that.

The “principlists” [Khomeiny-ite hard-liners] have arrested all the key activists of the reformist movement — their political leaders, strategists, campaigners, journalists and even feminists and student activists in order to defend the election result and to avoid further turmoil and tensions.

The Islamic Republic establishment has had two wings with serious disagreements. Is there going to be more repression in Iran? That is still on open question which depends on many factors.

However, Saeed Hajjarian, the reformists’ strategist, who is now imprisoned, has a thesis which goes, “push from below, compromise on above”.

And this is what happened in last month. Reformists demonstrated their power and influence in big cities to show to their rival that they have a bigger proportion of power. However, the most prominent figures of the reformists are imprisoned. So, it is too soon to judge.

Division among the reformists is possible. One part of them will stay with the regime and try to make change via internal, official channels, and another part will separate off.

In the mainstream media, we saw a mass of people rioting in the street, marching, fighting, and throwing stones at the police. This picture seems very radical, but illuminates only part of the picture. I would say the movement was being pumped up by the power of the reformists.

The significant mistake which all the experts made was assessing these incidents as an attempt to overthrow the regime — or more radically as a revolution.

But the motivation behind the movement was a rigged election. Their defini-

tion of victory would not necessarily have been anything more than recounting the votes or a cancellation of the election. I don’t think the masses would have stayed in the street if they had achieved either of these things.

This movement reflected the Iranian middle-class demands which are represented by the reformists’ slogans. Most protesters in the street were people who have got access to the internet (Facebook users and YouTube account holders) and people who have got mobiles to record film on the streets. (Obviously it played the role of an alternative media.) But most working-class people in countries such as Iran don’t have access to these things.

The Iranian middle class is a considerable proportion of the society. They live in big cities (like Tehran); they have the social weight to form, shape and present their demands as the interests of society.

You can judge on a movement by its interests, demands and slogans and what they stand for. What is this movement’s main slogan? It is “where is my vote?”, “Allah-o-Akbar” (“God is great”), “Down with Dictator” or something like that.

There are some people who believe that situations like that offer opportunities to express ideas. I agree one hundred percent.

The Iranian middle class participated in these protests and shouted they want to change! But they don’t aim to shut down the government or make a revolution. Iranian people showed that they are ready to make *reform* and also they are ready to pay for that, even in blood.

In the Iranian revolution, the Iranian working class participated and brought the Shah to his knees, but during the conflicts after the election, the Iranian working class was absent and didn’t participate. It seems they don’t see any mutual interests with the green movement around Mousavi.

Most importantly, Ahmadinejad, speaking about supporting poor people, has gained quite significant influence among the workers. In the last four years Ahmadinejad, by distributing a lot of money to poor people, and offering different types of loans to them, has made himself a reputation and won influence among them.

Consequently, it is not only “principlists” (hard liners) who support the current president; his faction has got social roots.

“A military coup by the

Pepe Escobar interviewed on Realnews Network, 17 June

What happened in Iran is a military coup. The coup was made by the Republican Guard with the connivance of the Supreme Leader. It is a war at the top between two very strong factions in an extremely complicated and fluid Iranian political system.

Allied with the Republican Guard are the baseej militias. In Iran people tell you they are the “army of 20 million”. They are supposed to be 20 million. That is not true. They are four or five million. But a few months ago a plan was hatched to bring them to the level of 13 million. Every baseeji had to recruit four or five others. In the rural provinces this is very easy. Unemployment in Iran (not officially) is 20-30% at least for young people. If you are a baseeji you are part of a glorified gang. You are covered by the official state powers. You are enforcing the principles of the Islamic Revolution. They are considered in Iran as “principlists” or hard-core Khomeinists.

A few months ago, very few people in Iran were expecting the Green Revolution conducted by Mousavi. The television debates were the catalyst. The first big debate was between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi. Mousavi did not accuse Ahmadinejad of being a dictator. He says the policies implemented by Ahmadinejad are leading towards a dictatorship.

When Ahmadinejad and the Minister of Interior (who monitor Iran 24-7) saw the groundswell of opposition in all the big cities and Tehran, they could see a man, Mousavi who was a former Prime Minister during Khomeini, and very competent manager during the 80s. They also remember that when he was Prime Minister he was a balancing act between Khomeini and Khamenei, then President.

Khomeini was using Mousavi to control

Khamenei as President. Mousavi could play Khomeini against Khamenei.

When Ahmadinejad saw the Green Revolution starting, he began to accuse Rafsanjani during the debates. This is very important for popular sentiment in Iran, because Rafsanjani is a billionaire. He is not only the richest man in Iran, he is also probably the most powerful man in Iran, apart from the Supreme Leader. He controls the Council of Guards and the Council of Experts. He could probably chose the next Supreme Leader, if he has enough votes in the Council of Experts.

These attacks by Ahmadinejad against Rafsanjani work very well on a popular level. One of the reasons Ahmadinejad won the election is because yes, he has a lot of support in the working class, with the peasants; but one of his main things is corruption. If you go to a mosque or a bazaar or a tea shop in a provincial town in Iran they talk about Rafsanjani as a corrupt billionaire who doesn’t understand their problems.

But this was not enough for Ahmadinejad to win the election by an almost two to one margin and that is where the whole operation at the Ministry of Interior comes in [in stealing the election].

Our “military coup”, if we express it that way, means the Republican Guards are going to run the economy. They are already a very powerful force. They have airlines, airports, factories, industries, parts of the bazaar. Now they are taking over the whole economy.

But economics in Iran is extremely complicated. There is a mix of state and private sectors. It is a semi-socialist economy, or semi-Brezhnev/Russia style economy. At the same time private initiative is key. It is still basically a bazaar economy. The bazaaris in 2005 were aligned with Ahmadinejad. Not any more. Because of high inflation, high unemployment, the effects of the sanctions and the utmost

Honduran coup

Protests have been organised around the world to demand the reinstatement as president of Honduras of Manuel (Mel) Zelaya, ousted in a coup on 28 June. A protest outside the Honduran embassy in London on 29 June drew about 50, many of them from the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, and from Unite union’s south-east regional office.

Zelaya, although from the neoliberal Liberal Party, has angered the establishment in Honduras by supporting measures to alleviate poverty. Honduras ranks 117th in the world on the Human Development Index (HDI), while, by comparison, Costa Rica ranks 42nd, Mexico 55th, and Brazil 65th.

The trigger for the coup was Zelaya’s organisation of a referendum that would allow him another term as president. The military have begun cracking down on protests calling for Zelaya’s return to Honduras. There is a media black out.

For more background see <http://www.solidarity-us.org/hondurascoup>

California's socialists call for fightback

Twenty-six independent unions and other Iranian workers' organisations released a statement on the 26 June union Action Day welcoming the solidarity from the International Transport Workers' Federation and others who organised the action. Directly before 26 June, all except one of the trade unionists arrested during earlier May Day protests were released. However, Tehran's independent bus union leaders Mansour Osanloo and Ebrahim Madadi are still detained, along with education worker Farzad Kamangar. Dozens of journalists are also behind bars. Above: the British protest outside the Iranian embassy (photo: Vicki Morris). Members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty also leafleted outside Kings Cross station in London. www.justiceforiranianworkers.org

the Republican Guard"

incompetence of Ahmadinejad's economic managers. The bazaar switched their vote. They are saying "we want a well-managed economy." They are not even thinking about more cultural liberties. They want to make money again.

When oil was \$140-150 a barrel last year, the government were getting \$70 billion a year in oil money and they used it for handouts to buy votes. Some of these handouts went to infrastructure, building roads etc, but some went to people who could mobilise baseejis, it was about buying political influence in the remote parts of the country. It is a very populist regime.

The overall feeling after the election of 2005 after Ahmadinejad was elected was that there was going to be a major cultural crackdown. And that is exactly what happened. Right now they are more baseejis persecuting women everywhere, closing down reformist newspapers, being very vigilant against the internet and YouTube.

The problem is that the ultra conservative control all the centres of power. [Also the army, which was taken over by the Revolutionary Guard.] The most powerful person on the other side is Rafsanjani. Now we are going to see what is going to happen to the principles of the Islamic Revolution. If Rafsanjani can muster enough votes as Leader of the Council of Experts he can remove the Supreme Leader. The Council of Experts is 86 clerics, all of them very conservative. They meet twice a year maximum to discuss matters related to the Supreme Leader.

Apart from that there is not much that the reformists can do [they have no military power] and the crack down is going to be very hard and very ugly.

There is a comparison here with what happened in Tiananmen in 1989. When Deng Xiaoping ordered a crackdown he said "no mercy". I think the Revolutionary Guard are in a "no mercy" mood with what they are calling a foreign interven-

tion. They equate the Green Revolution with the colour-coded revolutions in Eurasia — though that has absolutely nothing to do with it.

The reformists would need splits in the armed forces for the mass demonstrations to have effect. We were getting reports that parts of the Republican Guard were aligned with Mousavi. But that was not the case.

Ahmadinejad and Bush were perfect as interlocutors, they were blaming each other all the time. Ahmadinejad is still thinking in Bush terms. He hasn't realised that a new kind of dialogue is possible if we follow Obama at his word of course. Most people in Iran, even poor people, think that if America respects Iran's independence, doesn't interfere with its foreign policy, that Iran is allowed to have a civil nuclear programme, this is fine, it is not Great Satan any more. Try to tell this to the Washington elite. It is impossible. They are more or less still in a Cold War mood against Iran.

I'm sure that Ahmadinejad is calculating on there being more aggressive words from the US. They are thinking that first they will get rid of the "green problem", then they will concentrate on relations with the US but under our own terms. They think this is perfect for them, Iranian national feeling will rally behind them. They are not thinking in terms of the Obama effect.

The Green Revolution is not an Obama effect, it is a completely different phenomenon. It is indigenous. It is an urban phenomena, coming from people who could see what Ahmadinejad was doing wrong, could see what there was an alternative within the framework of the Islamic Republic. They could see Mousavi was not a great reformer, that he was a pragmatic conservative, but that rallying behind him could be a way out of this impasse.

<http://therealnews.com>

Steve Zeltzer, a longtime socialist activist in San Francisco, spoke to *Solidarity*

The Peace and Freedom Party of California — which is the only socialist party on the ballot, with 60,000 registered members — has called a conference on 1 August to try to form a new socialist and working-class alternative across the USA in 2010 (<http://peaceandfreedom.org/home/noc>).

With the economic crisis, and now the state budget crisis in California, I think the bubble around Obama is being burst. It's a good time to present a socialist programme.

California state governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, is paying the state's bills with IOUs, saying that the state has run out of dollars, and has forced state employees to take three days' unpaid leave every month.

He's trying to cut all state employees' pay to the minimum wage. He's been blocked on that by the courts for the present. He's shutting down many services and programmes for low-income people.

The unions have refused to have any mass mobilisation. For example, on Thursday 2 July there was a demonstration in the state capital, Sacramento, by SEIU Local 1000, which represents 70,000 state workers in California, and they only had about 2000 or 3000 people there.

The SEIU, which is the biggest union in California, has 750,000 members in the state, and maybe 25,000 in Sacramento. They didn't even mobilise their own members.

The unions in California have not made an emergency call for mobilisation. They have not formed a united front. Each union demonstrates separately. For example, the teachers in Richmond, where they have been on strike, have had separate rallies. County workers throughout the state have had rallies, and local workers.

But meanwhile the unions are taking concessions, and they are not running any campaign to challenge the structural problems.

A large number of local services are funded by property taxes, so the decline of 20% to 30% in housing prices means a big decline in revenue for the public services. This is a long-term decline.

To tackle it requires a restructuring of the constitution in California. Firstly, the constitution requires a two-thirds vote for a budget to be passed, so the Republicans have prevented a budget being passed without massive cutbacks. Secondly, we need an elimination of the commercial exemption in Proposition 13 [a constitutional amendment from 1978 limiting property taxes], which has meant a transfer of taxation from corporations to home-owners, and a move to tax the wealthy in California.

The Democrats are refusing to do that, and the unions are refusing to call any mass demonstrations or to have any campaign to tax the corporations, to get single-payer health care, to get rid of the [private] insurance companies [which currently dominate health insurance].

There is a political vacuum in California and nationally. In San Francisco Labor Council a resolution was passed calling on Obama and the Democrats in Congress to have the federal government back California state bonds. There's been no response to that. The Obama administration is bailing out the banks and the auto companies, but they are refusing to back California's bonds so that the state government can borrow.

The union leaders' strategy of relying on the Democrats has led to this fiasco. In fact the Democratic leadership in California was involved in putting forward a ballot amendment in April that would have put a cut on public spending. You had the California Teachers' Association supporting those ballot measures, and the other unions opposing them. A leader of the California Teachers' Association, at a recent teachers' rally, suggested that the answer to the budget problem was to cut back the school year by ten days.

There is no solution within the present framework. A new network has been formed, called United Public Workers for Action, UPWA, <http://upwa.info>, which is seeking to unite public workers in California and nationally, to set up local cross-union committees, and to develop a programme for the crisis. It is campaigning for a common day of action by all 1.5 million public workers across California.

The banks are in charge, really. They have said that they will accept the state's IOUs, but they can stop that whenever they choose.

ITALY

Fear and loathing in Berlusconi's state

HUGH EDWARDS REPORTS FROM BOLOGNA

"Generally they are short and dark-skinned. Many stink because they wear the same clothes for weeks. They construct shacks to live in on the outskirts. When they aspire to live in the city centre they rent ugly, run-down apartments; they appear at first, two of them looking for a room and a kitchen, and soon after a few days there are four of them, then six, eight, 10 and what have you.

They speak a language unintelligible, perhaps ancient dialects. Their children they use to beg with, while in front of the churches women and the old ask for pity in whimpering and irritating tones. They produce lots of children, struggling to keep them, while remaining strongly united among themselves.

It is said they are dedicated to thieving and, if confronted, violent. Our women ignore them because they are savage and repellent and it's common knowledge that rape is widespread among [them].

The authorities have opened the frontiers of the country too easily and at the same time they have failed to identify those who come to work from those who intend to live either by expedients or crime."

Report of the Inspector for Italian Immigration to the American Congress, 1912

It is a bitter and painful irony of history that millions of modern Italians, descendants of those same vilified and excoriated victims of the racist American establishment of 1912, now append the same vile stereotypes to the three and half million or so "dark-skinned" foreigners living and working in Italy.

The recent European, provincial and regional elections here have confirmed, in an ever more violent and paranoid atmosphere of racist hate, what has been the major feature of Silvio Berlusconi's Freedom Party government since the elections that brought it to power more than a year ago. In fact, its demagogic pre-electoral campaign of scaremongering and scapegoating the immigrant population had played a major part in Berlusconi's initial electoral triumph, driving millions of workers into the arms of his coalition partner, the xenophobic and racist Northern League of

Umberto Bossi.

As the effects of the economic and financial crisis began to expose Berlusconi's lying refrain that everything in the garden of Italy is sunny and rosy — it is one of the worst affected countries! — the artillery of Berlusconi's media empire, private and public, reached a crescendo of chauvinistic phobia not seen in Italy since the fascist era. Every incident, even the most banal and trivial, where an immigrant is involved, has become "evidence" of a "threat" to the "security" of the native population.

In such a climate of suspicion — on a visit to Milan Berlusconi stated disapprovingly that it seemed more like an "African city" — the Northern League's Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni exceeded even his own capacity for inhumanity when he announced, to the joy of his supporters in parliament, that two boatloads of 600 or so famished and ill men, women and children from sub-Saharan Africa had been turned back to their point of departure in Libya, in breach of national and international law and every instinct of common humanity and natural justice.

The odious Maroni knew only too well that death, rape and family dispersion awaited the occupants of the two ships in the camps of the Libyan dictator, with whom a week later Berlusconi concluded a lucrative investment deal in Libya's mineral resources in return for acknowledging fascist Italy's crimes there.

Buoyed up by opinion polls, Maroni completed his anti-immigrant measures by passing into law a racist bill which designates as criminals those found without a residency permit. Fined up to 5,000 euros and detained for six months, the victim is then expelled. Nothing could more graphically reveal the police mentality of the Italian bureaucracy, a legacy of the fascist penal code that remained operative until the 1970s, and is, in spirit, evident everywhere.

More than any other major European state Italy restricts the issuing of residency permits, swelling the numbers of "irregulars", easy prey to the sweatshops of the north and north east, the majority of whose proprietors support Maroni's Northern League!

This legislation fuels petit-bourgeois fantasies about hunting down the "irregulars" across the north —

teams of "vigilantes, guardians of the people", official and unofficial, have sprung into life blessed by not only the populist and neo-fascist councils like Verona and Treviso, but also where the centre-left occupy the local state, eg, in Florence. It also hits those in regular employment who if they lose their job lose their permits and are thus "criminal", despite having lived in Italy for years.

None of this was inevitable! The surge of mass support here for the actions of Berlusconi and Bossi, especially among sections of workers traditionally on the left underlines is the demoralisation and disorientation at the heart of the Italian working class movement and in the lives of millions, especially among the young, students and women.

And while it is just to point to the debacle of the last centre-left government of Romano Prodi and the clique of "communists" and "radicals" within it who criminally contributed to its reactionary and shameful existence and ignominious end, that debacle was the consummation of a decade and a half of raised expectations and hopes dashed by setbacks and defeat on almost every front of struggle.

The statistics spell it out: the economy has been stagnant for 15 years, wages in Italy are among the lowest in Europe, and millions have seen their quality of life deteriorate, especially after the arrival of the euro and the end of the state's time-honoured competitive devaluations.

The pace, intensity and duration of work has reached murderous proportions, literally, as the numbers dying and maimed at work are among the highest in the world. The percentage of women at work, especially in the south, is the lowest in Europe, while at the same time mechanisms of social mobility are blocked by the underfunded, inefficient and corrupt university system.

Is it any wonder that legions of teenage women, even those in higher education, indicate that their principal ambition is to be a "veline", a half-naked dancing girl on one of Berlusconi's private or state TV shows? Can one wonder that there is profound despair among millions when no matter who governed in the last 15 years the income of the richest one third grew enormously while that of the the rest stagnated or declined?

AFGHANISTAN

New US offensive in Afghanistan

BY RHODRI EVANS

US troops, backed up in a small way by British troops, have launched a big offensive in the Helmand district of southern Afghanistan.

The offensive is part of US president Barack Obama's military build-up in Afghanistan. He has sent 21,000 extra troops already this year, and by the end of 2009 US forces are due to number 68,000, double the 2008 level.

The immediate objective of the offensive is to secure the area so that voting for the scheduled Afghan presidential election can take place on 15 August.

According to press reports, Taliban fighters in Helmand have mostly ducked the blow, slipping over the border into Pakistan. The new US commander in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, says that he will use aerial bombing "in most cases" only to help US troops at threat of being overrun. So far no large civilian casualties are reported from the US offensive.

But what is the perspective? Obama signals that he wants to use the military build-up to get some limited stability in Afghanistan and thus secure good terms for negotiating US withdrawal. But will it work that way? It seems not.

On the record since 2001, even if the 15 August election runs smoothly, there is little chance any time soon of the Kabul government establishing any normal, rou-

tine rule in areas like Helmand.

Afghanistan has never had a strong central government. Even the US makes little secret about Afghan president Hamid Karzai's administration being corrupt and mainly based on Islamist gangs from the northern peoples of Afghanistan.

There has been only a token representation for the Afghan army in the Helmand operation.

Once the election is over, will the US troops withdraw from Helmand? So the Taliban take over again? Will the US try to bomb the Taliban in Pakistan, thus further destabilising Pakistan and driving more people into the arms of the Taliban?

Or will the US troops stay in Helmand for a long time, trying to establish a de facto US military administration there?

The peoples of Afghanistan are even more refractory to foreign rule than to centralised administration from Kabul, and an effort to establish long-term US military rule in Helmand would most likely draw the US troops into a spreading guerrilla conflict with local people.

The Taliban represent no sort of "national liberation" or "peace". They have shown their attitude to democracy by threatening to kill anyone who takes part in the 15 August voting.

Socialists in Britain should support democratic and secularising forces in Afghanistan, such as the women's movement which demonstrated in Kabul in April this year. In the event of a US withdrawal, we would side

with the defence of the cities, where some tiny democratic space exists, against the Taliban and similar. We sided with the defence of Kabul, even under Afghan-Stalinist administration, against Islamic clerical-fascist militias after the Russian troops withdrew (as we demanded they should) in 1988.

Today, it is likely that Kabul, with its population much increased since 2001 and a fairly large Afghan army at its disposal, could indeed defend itself against the Taliban, whose main base lies in areas of Afghanistan further south, or negotiate a stand-off. We would support the setting up of people's militias in the cities for their defence.

Despite the absence of a strong workers' movement in Afghanistan, to favour US troop withdrawal does not equate to supporting (explicitly or tacitly) Taliban conquest of the country.

The Pakistani workers' movement may be able to marginalise the Taliban (mainly based in Pakistan). The US military show no sign of doing so.

Although the Taliban fled in disarray in 2001, over eight years of US military efforts to "pacify" Afghanistan since then have left the country in a worsening chaos of local Islamic-warlord rule. On the evidence, Obama's new offensives can reverse the trend only patchily and episodically. Overall they are likely to make it worse.

Socialists cannot but oppose the new US offensive and the presence of US troops in Afghanistan.

TWO RESPONSES TO MICHAEL JACKSON'S DEATH

Why we'll remember him

BY BOB SUTTON

I've been thinking about Michael Jackson a lot this week. This is hardly surprising given the massive media coverage and that, well, everyone is talking about it. Within hours of the news breaking, the inevitable jokes were already doing the rounds. Generally, I've got a (probably quite inappropriate) weakness for dark humour. However, on this occasion, I was struck by it all being quite sad.

The bare bones of the matter are that one of the most outrageously talented performers of our times had collapsed and died. The reports in the London free papers, which I'll admit to ploughing through, give an account of Jackson, half-starved, driven to madness and drug-addiction, facing a schedule of performances simply beyond him, just not being able to cope any more.

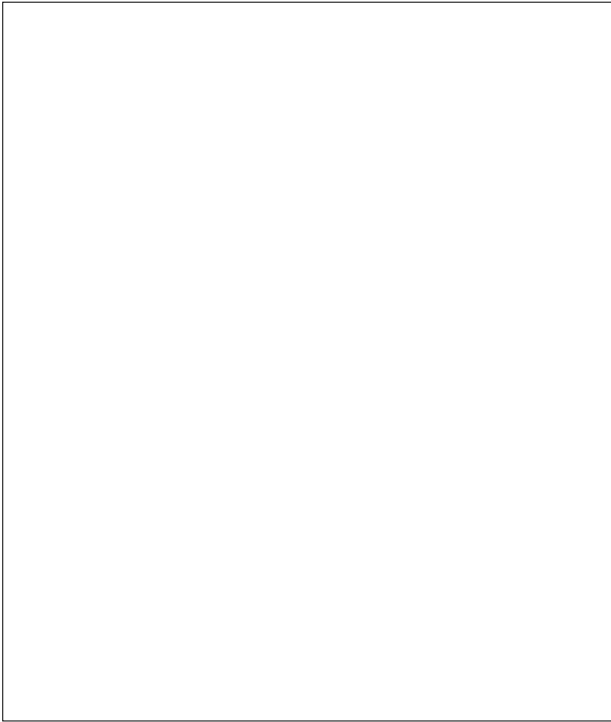
All this goes far deeper. That Michael Jackson was abused as a child is common knowledge. This was someone crushed by the weight of his troubled childhood, by the pressure of his work, who suffered both physical and mental collapse.

Over the past week I have had dozens of conversations with people who were struck by his death and felt real sympathy for someone who found the world too much for him.

What is interesting is the idea that capital never really stops treating people like animals. Even society's biggest "stars" are simply the thoroughbred horses. For sure they are fed well and live lives of extraordinary wealth, but they're still shunted around and put to work, with little thought for their well-being.

There is also much to be said about the racial politics of Jackson's life. Yes, he was a pioneering and groundbreaking black artist. But to my mind he strove to achieve an ideal of "beauty" that was racist, utterly "white", and ended up butchering his own face.

At the time a few years ago when the child sex scan-



dal was really big news. I was still at school. Many black classmates took a position of unconditional defence of Jackson; friends who would have been pretty virulent against anyone else facing similar charges put him beyond criticism. As with other conspiracy theories, I severely doubt it, but it's not uncommon for people to talk about the whole thing as some sort of racist plot to destroy him.

We are socialists, we want to build a society where children, however talented, are allowed to grow and develop at their own pace, where no one grows to hate themselves, the colour and shape of their face. Those with the sort of problems of mental health Michael

Jackson clearly had will be supported and given help.

Jackson's stardom, and more importantly, the fact that there was money to be made from him, meant no one ever tackled his mental illness. Besides, the "care" most people receive in capitalist society amounts to little more than being imprisoned and pumped full of drugs.

What we say I think goes beyond that. This system is "mad" and sends us all mad; it's largely the extent to which people have support, friendships and strength to deal with society that varies. It will continue to do so if it is not smashed and replaced by a society based on solidarity and mutual assistance.

At the end of the day, thinking about Michael Jackson should not leave us despairing of the state of the world. Yes, large parts his life seems to have been a tortured wreckage, but what he created, what he will be remembered for, the reason it meant something to so many people to find out he'd died, was that he made great music.

For millions, music is their one release from the strains of life. On a Friday or Saturday night, it is the one time in the week where people are emancipated, set free.

There might not be anyone who can claim to have made so many lives that much more bearable. Sitting in a hot office is not so bad when you've had Michael Jackson on the radio all week. As I walked home, past the bus garage, in the shops, his music is playing, putting a spring in people's steps.

Clearly the struggle to liberate ourselves from the system that makes slaves of us will take a lot more than stolen moments of enjoyment. Music is not a substitute for workers organising, educating themselves, making solidarity and fighting.

However, our socialism is based on a spirit of optimism, freedom and life. You could do a lot worse than listen to some Michael Jackson for a bit of that. It's a start.

Abuse, race and celebrity

BY DUNCAN MORRISON

Michael Jackson's life and death raise a number of issues that socialists should be interested in.

Abuse: Jackson's father Joe physically and psychologically abused him while a child. As the manager of the Jackson 5, the band Michael and his brothers were in as children, Joe relentlessly forced them to pursue fame. He would punish the children with whippings. Michael would claim in later life that he had no childhood and that in his youth he would often vomit on seeing his father.

Michael was twice publicly accused of child sexual abuse. One trial was settled for \$22 million and at the other trial he was acquitted.

His behaviour with children was certainly highly inappropriate. He admitted to sleeping with children in his bed. One mental health professional who examined Jackson claimed rather than being a paedophile he had become a regressed ten year old.

We cannot know for sure whether he did molest children. His money allowed him to buy off one case and get the best lawyers in the other case. However it is clear that his childhood had deeply scarred him and was responsible for his strange behaviour towards children as an adult.

Race: The Jackson 5 broke down some huge barriers for black people. They were the first successful black boy band. This meant that they were the first black artists to have their posters pinned to lots of young people's walls. There was a syndicated cartoon based on the band. Today, there are not a lot of black faces in syndicated cartoons. There were even less in the 1970s.

Later, as a solo artist, Jackson would also break down barriers. With the release of the *Thriller* album and the associated singles and videos, Jackson became the first black artist regularly played on MTV.

MTV at that point, in the early 80s, was critical in

publicising artists. The channel claimed that they did not have a racist policy but simply focussed on "rock" acts. "Rock" acts were exclusively white.

On the release of *Thriller*, Jackson, strongly supported by his record label CBS, broke through that barrier. The president of CBS apparently threatened to stop any of the company's artists' videos appearing on MTV and to go public with his claims of racism.

This was enough to persuade the channel to start running the Billie Jean video, the reaction to which ensured that the colour bar was broken forever.

None of the above is the fighting working-class anti-racism that we in the Alliance for Workers' Liberty espouse, but it is very important. It is perhaps hard now, when black artists' videos and publicity are widespread, to understand the scale and significance of these achievements.

The issue of race with Jackson is not an uncomplicated one, though. Michael clearly had a great deal of plastic surgery which made his face appear less "black". It has also been claimed that Jackson bleached his skin — although he denied that, claiming it was to do with his treatment for vitiligo and lupus.

On the re-release of his solo albums Jackson had the photos doctored to look more in line with his current appearance than the originals did. Jackson always claimed to be proud to be a black American. However his obvious discomfort with his own looks suggested something different.

In his song "They don't care about us", Jackson also suggested at the least insensitivity about anti-semitism with the lyric "jew me, sue me".

Celebrity: Michael Jackson was the most famous man on the planet in the 1980s. He was a huge star but a recluse. The media generated and fed off thousands of stories of him.

The reaction to his death has been massively overblown. In a world of 24-hour news and celebrity

culture, we have been bombarded with Jackson for a fortnight. He was a great singer and dancer, he made some important advances for black people, but he was a deeply disturbed and disturbing individual.

That his music is selling in such great quantities after his death raises interesting questions. Who is buying it? It is not as though people didn't know about Michael Jackson before he died, it's not as though they didn't know his music. If they liked it they could have bought it at any point. Why wait until he has died? Why the rush after he has died? If you hadn't bought it up until now, it is not going to disappear in the next few years either.

Some of the people buying it now must already own it, why are they buying it again now? The need to be part of something, to feel a belonging, to exclude that emptiness that modern alienated life creates.

Jackson was seemingly bankrupt at the end of his life having spent billions trying to fill the voids in his life. Millions of people seem to be buying his back-catalogue to try to do the same in theirs.

I personally find it heart-breaking to see the pictures of the young Michael either in the Jackson 5 or solo, a beautiful boy/young man who could dance and sing like no other. As socialists we must try to create a world that first and foremost protects children from abuse whether that be from family members or people outside the family, a society that doesn't mutilate talent like Michael's, a world where there are no more fights to be had against racism and discrimination, where young people grow up happy and confident in how they look.

A world that celebrates talent but has no truck with the vacuous merry go-round of celebrity.

Whilst we fight for that better world some of us will take time out to enjoy Michael Jackson's music. Some of it really was very good.

LETTER

Making trouble in the UK?

Sometimes great minds think alike — or at least minds focussed on spreading the word about working-class struggle. The timing of Martin Donohue's tribute (*Solidarity* 3/154) to the US *Labor Notes* publication *A Troublemaker's Handbook* (TMH) coincides almost exactly with the National Shop Stewards' Network's latest conference in London on 27 June, where as NSSN Education and Publications officer I issued an appeal for a British "Troublemaker's Handbook" — with the rather less snazzy (provisional) title *Tips and Victories*.

At the NSSN conference, as at all gatherings of trade union activists, from shop steward classes to TUC bar discussions, we heard not only of demands and grievances but also of victories great and small against capital. These range from the Lindsey Oil Refinery workers' unequivocal defeat of oil giant Total to the workplace organising of Tube cleaners which is taking place against all the odds as strong sections of workers lend their support to these highly vulnerable but courageous activists.

All these stories, from strikes to organising strategies, like the highly effective rank and file structures developed at Metronet — including union meetings of non-unionised workers — and at Fujitsu, where long-term stewards have drawn more and more workers across this high-tech company into basic forms of union participation — deserve to be heard, not only as part of recognising their immense achievements in difficult circumstances but, more importantly, in order to pass on to other activists these "tips" on achieving "victories" large and small.

The purpose of a UK Troublemaker's Handbook, as in the US version — actually the second of a highly successful series — is, more than anything, to strengthen workers' struggles and organising activities through awareness of existing examples of victories large and small which, for obvious reasons, very rarely hit the headlines.

Over and over at the NSSN conference, workers expressed their need for more information about what's going on across the movement. As Martin kindly suggests, the "excellent" *Trade Union News*, a publication I once edited, did once perform that function and appeared highly valued by rank and file workers, pushing its circulation up rapidly into the thousands before the usual suspects forced its demise.

The quarterly publication *Solidarity: the Trade Union Magazine* has partially filled this vacuum, but needs more support and building.

In the meantime, let's hope *Tips and Victories* will provide much-needed information and encouragement for workers in struggle. I'm hoping to gain enough material within the next six months or so to get it out next year. Please send your tips and victories to me at mooco3@btinternet.com.

Sheila Cohen

POLICE VIOLENCE

Not everyone's problem

Gemma Short reviews Panorama, BBC1, 6 July.

Well done to Panorama for taking up the issue of police violence — their illegal tactics against legitimate protest when the majority of the mainstream media is currently still ignoring it (except the *Guardian*).

Although most of the information wasn't new to those of us who are used to police intimidation on even the most peaceful of rallies, the programme had some interesting information about police "forward intelligence teams" (the guys with the camcorders recording your every move), the information they gather and where it is stored (it is indefinitely stored even if there is no reason to suspect the person in the recording of a crime).

The programme also went beyond *Guardian* coverage in linking the behaviour of the police at the G20 (including the raid on a squat using taser guns) to the constant surveillance of protest at events such as climate camp and the protests at E-on in Nottingham.

However, in attempting to appeal to its audience this programme made unnecessary concessions (to the police side) and ended up missing some crucial points.

Apart from the G20, the programme largely focused on environmental protest, seemingly as a way to appeal to a fairly mild mannered audience. Climate change is

something a big range of people see as a problem and seen as a legitimate reason to protest.

Interviewees were in the main "upstanding members of society" — Tory MPs, a Lib Dem Justice spokesperson, lawyers, one elderly middle England fellow trying to preserve his local lakes — people you would not expect to be "hoodlums", on the wrong side of the police for any reason.

Although this content was used to give the impression that an extreme of police control, violence and surveillance could affect anyone who dares protest, it misses the point. It is not "most people" but the working class and serious anti-capitalists fighting for jobs, homes and a future, or black people and youth who have been most often at the blunt end of police violence. The police are partial, prejudiced and particular about who they attack.

The programme also strongly suggested that the police are a necessary law and peace keeping force, that they have just gone too far and should be kept under control a little — one interviewee even said "at least the police are accountable".

The police are certainly *not* accountable to the vast majority of society! We know that they have not just "gone too far" this time, but that their very existence as a hierarchical, walled-off instrument of control is a threat to our class organising and protesting.

LABOUR MOVEMENT HANDBOOK

Democracy is power

Martin Donohue recommends *Democracy is Power*, from the Labor Notes rank-and-file organising project in the US.

In the last issue of *Solidarity* I recommended the *Trouble Maker's Handbook* (also produced by Labor Notes) as an invaluable resource for rank and file union activists. This companion volume addresses the key question in any serious attempt at union renewal, democracy.

The central message of this book is that only consistent democracy offers hope for union revival. And it is the struggle for that democracy and accountability that can itself transform the existing movement.

Why should members invest time and energy into a union that denies them any real say over the key questions that matter to them? Apathy is a charge often cynically thrown at union members by full time officers. As this book shows democracy, mobilisation and involvement are inseparable.

Like the TMH, *Democracy is Power* is strongly rooted in the US experience; but there is much here for any serious UK union activist. The voices and experiences of rank-and-file reformers come through loud and clear.

The struggles of Teamsters for a Democratic Union contribute much to this book and illustrate the strengths of a democratic rank and file approach. The unfinished struggles for democracy in the Teamsters were not around abstract structural changes but were

also fought over the concrete issues of accountability and control of contract negotiations. These were the issues that impacted directly on the members and that could inspire active participation. Organising around questions of union democracy was clearly seen as integral to the struggle to defend and improve pay and conditions.

This book is also a starting point for discussions around the nature of leadership, promoting involvement in the union, reform caucuses and inclusion and equality among other topics. The nuts and bolts of democracy are not neglected either.

Sections on being effective at meetings, structures and byelaws and elections are rewarding. Particularly useful is a section on what to do once "reform" candidates have taken power in a branch.

Unions can only be rebuilt from the bottom up. This book is valuable as an antidote to empty top down "organising" rhetoric. However it is also valuable as an illustration of what genuine rank and file organisation looks like and does.

The UK union movement is littered with broad lefts, "united" lefts, socialist this and that etc. etc. How many of these organisations are based on any notion of rank-and-file organising or the centrality of democracy?

This book could usefully fuel a very necessary debate around these key issues for socialists in the unions.

• *Democracy is Power* (special offer with Troublemakers Handbook 2) \$30 from

WHERE WE STAND

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists' relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.

Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

We fight for the labour movement to break with "social partnership" and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses.

Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers' struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups.

We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

We stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Black and white workers' unity against racism.
- Open borders.

- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.

- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.

- Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.

- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.

The SWP, Egypt and the lessons of the Iranian revolution

By SACHA ISMAIL

AWL comrades attended a meeting at the SWP's "Marxism 2009" event (2-6 July) on "Islamism and the new Arab left", in fact mostly about Egypt. Listening to Anne Alexander's talk, you learned a lot.

But the overall picture she presented was hopelessly mangled by the SWP's confused theorisation of political Islam. The political conclusions it suggested are the same as those which three decades ago led to catastrophe for the left and the working class in Iran.

Alexander quite explicitly built on the arguments made by Chris Harman in his pamphlet *The Prophet and the Proletariat*. According to this view, Islamism, as a cross-class, petty bourgeois led movement, is "contradictory", simultaneously expressing a progressive or partially progressive critique of the brutality and dislocation of capitalist modernisation in the region (she described it as aiming to make modern civilisation "in some respects more human") and unable to genuinely confront imperialism and capitalism because it can never mobilise the masses to "go the whole way". It is comparable to other progressive petty bourgeois movements, national liberation movements for instance. While remaining critical and independent of all Islamists, we should distinguish between reformist and more revolutionary strands.

But what is progressive about the Islamist critique of capitalist modernity? Don't the Islamists aim to establish a society and state which, while still capitalist, are in almost all respects — democracy, freedom of speech and thought, the emancipation of women, sexual liberation, the ability of workers to organise — more reactionary than what they replace?

Indeed the more radical Islamists, who will go further to confront the existing state, mobilising a mass movement to smash it, are in fact *worse* than the "moderate" ones — since their "radicalism" serves reactionary goals, and their mass movement also smashes the working-class movement and the left. The Iranian counter-revolution of 1979 is a clear case in point.

We cannot relate to Islamist movements as we do to movements whose basic goals are progressive (e.g. movements of oppressed nations or social groups), let alone to working-class movements under reformist leadership. We must relate to them as a consistently reactionary force which poses a huge threat to the working class and oppressed.

Anne Alexander's rested heavily on two supplementary points, both essentially 'straw men'.

Firstly, she was at great pains to insist that Islamism is not fascist. In flat terms, true; fascism arose in a specific context. Alexander claimed that, while Islamists were in many cases hostile to working-class struggle, Islamism's "primary goal is not to smash the working class". This is an odd distinction, given that Islamism in power and on the ascent to power does destroy the organisations of the labour movement with a fascist-type thoroughness. Moreover, like fascism, it mobilises a mass movement of the poor and dispossessed (the unemployed, the impoverished petty bourgeoisie) to do so. It is *fascistic* — which is why in 1946 SWP founder Tony Cliff rightly described Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the main subject of Alexander's talk, as "clerical fascist".

But, argued Alexander, we need to win over Islamism's base of social support; we have to understand that it gains strength because of the "contradictions" and brutality of capitalist development. These arguments, however, apply equally to fascism.

Secondly, she made great play of the failings of the Stalinist left in the Middle East, which abandoned independent working-class politics to the extent of merging itself into Arab nationalism; in Egypt, for instance, having effectively justified the Nasser regime's execution of striking workers on grounds of "anti-imperialism", the Stalinists dissolved themselves into the Nasserite party. They were also willing to support the regime's suppression of the Muslim

Opposing Mubarak should not mean supporting the Muslim Brotherhood

Brotherhood, a tradition continued by the Stalinist and Arab nationalist left for decades.

Clearly this was criminally wrong; we need to refound Marxism on the basis of working-class independence from all bourgeois factions and regimes, no matter how "progressive" or "anti-imperialist" they claim to be. But this yardstick, whose measure condemns those "leftists" who collapsed into Arab nationalism, equally condemns those who abandon the necessary socialist hostility to the reactionary opposition the Islamists represent. Harman's formulation "with the state never, with the Islamists sometimes" is not the opposite of the Stalinists' capitulation to Arab nationalism, but its mirror image.

It is possible to retain independence from regimes such as Mubarak's, oppose the repressive measures which at present are directed in large part against the Islamists and remain sharply hostile to political Islam. In the 1930s, after all, the Trotskyists opposed support for bourgeois repression against the fascists, without anyway imagining that this required a letting up of revolutionary hostility to them.

The SWP clearly believes that it would be progressive if the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Egypt. They are not uncritical; thus Alexander spoke about how the Brotherhood has supported the landlords in tussles over land reform. At the same time, she pointed out, they have supported some strikes against the regime. But again this misses the point. All kinds of reactionary forces are capable of endorsing movements of the exploited aimed against their most immediate enemies. Thus the Iranian Islamists supported the workers' uprising against the Shah.

Once the latter had come to power, however, they shattered the workers' movement and imposed an even more anti-working class regime. This is true everywhere Islamists have come to or near power. For the Muslim Brothers to replace Mubarak would be a total disaster for the working class. In the context of a rising tide of working-class struggle in Egypt, clarity on this question could not be more important.

The spectre of Iran hovered over the meeting; since we were very determinedly not called to speak, we did not think it would be verbalised. An unaffiliated Tunisian comrade was called, however, and made the necessary point — whatever they say now, the Islamists make use of democratic slogans as a way of reaching the point where they can crush democracy. The left internationally needs to learn this lesson.

- For a longer version of this article see www.workersliberty.org

- For Tony Cliff on the Muslim Brotherhood see www.workersliberty.org/node/3266

Socialist Alliance call makes progress in North East

Several dozen activists in the North East have signed the call issued by Workers' Liberty for a new Socialist Alliance.

There is special interest in the area because of the existence of groupings such as Tyneside Socialist Forum and Teesside Solidarity Network — forums in which socialists from different tendencies and none can come together in common activity and debate.

Tyneside Socialist Forum has existed since the old Socialist Alliance, but Teesside Solidarity Network is a new grouping initiated by AWL comrades. Both groups will be discussing the statement soon.

Even in areas without existing left unity projects, there is widespread support for the idea of something like a new Socialist Alliance.

Do what the comrades in the North East have done — circulate copies of the statement, collect signatures and propose discussions about it in your trade union branch, campaign group or socialist organisation.

- www.workersliberty.org/newsocialistalliance

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How Vestas workers won the will to fight

By PATRICK ROLFE

On Friday 26 July, Workers' Climate Action and the Cowes Trades Council held a 100-strong public meeting to oppose the closure of the Vestas plant, Britain's only wind turbine factory, on the Isle of Wight. Two months ago, Vestas announced over 500 job cuts; it is seeking to move production to the USA.

Workers from the factory, as well as people from the community attended. By the end some were seriously discussing occupying the factory to save jobs and force much-needed investment in wind energy.

How did this come about?

The Isle of Wight is, for the most part, staunchly Conservative, with very little history of class struggle or environmentalism. It has one Labour councillor, no branch of any left group, and an apparently inactive Green Party branch. The previous campaign to save jobs at Vestas was very small, based mainly on a Facebook group and a petition. It had ground to a halt, lacking the confidence to take radical action.

A small number of activists from Workers' Liberty heard the news of the closure and began getting in touch with people on the island in the middle of June. We managed to in touch with a few older local trade unionists from the Trades Council, many with militant histories.

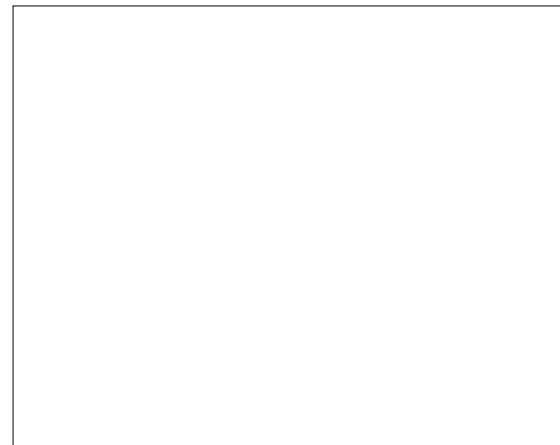
As impressed as these old heads of the labour movement were, and as glad as they were to see a bunch of energetic young people having come down to set up a campaign, no one expected it to go anywhere. The wisdom was that this was a workplace that had never been unionised, the closure had been announced, the ball was in motion; we should try by all means, but we shouldn't get too disappointed if we got nowhere.

Despite this, we went and stood outside the factory waiting for people to come out of work. Our only leaflet was the basic Workers' Climate Action "Climate Change is a Class Issue" one. We got chatting, heard stories of people having to move house after redundancy and various attempts over the years to get trade union recognition which met with victimisations and sackings.

People felt betrayed. Many are young, many had thought that this was an industry with a future, many genuinely felt they were doing their bit to save the planet. All this was down the drain.

People were pissed off, all that was lacking was the sense that anything could be done to fight back. We decided then to pull together a meeting.

We mobilised a small but diverse group of Workers' Climate Action activists (environmentalists, socialists, and anarchists) from across the



country to come to the Isle of Wight and spent a week intensively building for the meeting. We leafleted the gates of the two factory sites at least twice a day, did stalls in the main towns, and spoke to people about their concerns — the impact of the closure, environmental concerns, the poor state of health and safety at the Vestas plants.

We raised the appropriate political questions — who should determine how jobs are provided and how energy is produced? How should the transition to a low carbon economy be achieved? What is to be done about harsh management practices, job losses, and factory closures?

Working in a political environment not usually best suited to revolutionary politics, we found that our concern for jobs and the environment was immediately taken on by the many of the hundreds of people we spoke to.

Over the years Vestas have generated a high turnover of employees, to prevent unionisation and stop the workers from building up significant redundancy packages. The air conditioning in the factories is inadequate. Many workers suffer from contact dermatitis, an allergic reaction to the resin used in moulds, and the company operates an unofficial "three strikes and you're out" disciplinary procedure, as well as regularly denying workers days off and sick days for no good reason. The exploitation of the workers for profit provides us with an analogy for environmental exploitation and degradation.

We succeeded in talking to the local media, and were able to voice ideas like a "just transition" to a low carbon economy and democratic workers' control of industry, in forums where they had not been heard in a long time.

The former convenor of the Enfield Visteon plant, Ron Clarke, spoke at the public meeting about the experience and the tactics of occupation, telling the gathered crowds that physical control of the factory was the only way to bargain with

the bosses. The experience and success of the Visteon workers provided a galvanising example of what can be achieved if workers take action and stick together.

We encountered problems from all the usual sources. Just before the public meeting, a police inspector phoned the secretary of Cowes Trades Council, informing him that the Workers' Climate Action had published a piece exhorting Vestas workers to chain themselves to machinery — a lie of course. The police were, nevertheless, very visible outside the meeting.

In addition to this, many of the speakers brought to the meeting by the local Trades Council revealed themselves to be bureaucrats. They told workers to simply join Unite and get official recognition, but were disdainful about the idea of occupation. These business unionists and social partnership bureaucrats brought little to the campaign, but they certainly alienated a lot of workers with their elitist talk of letters written to "Lord Mandelson".

Despite the politically questionable character of the meeting, we managed to get workers and people on-board to expand the campaign further into the factory and the local community. The Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party are organising public meetings in Southampton and Portsmouth with speakers from Workers' Climate Action and the workers themselves. A protest in the centre of Newport is planned, with the possibility of a "happening" outside Downing Street in London to put pressure on the government.

National groups are expressing an interest in getting involved, and we are following up contacts in Denmark, where Vestas have their headquarters, with a view to encouraging solidarity actions. Watch this space, and the Workers' Climate Action website for more information.

Our actions to oppose the Vestas closure will demonstrate that, though energy and enthusiasm are essential to achieve results, we must also, as Lenin says "be able at each particular moment to find the particular link in the chain which you must grasp with all your might in order to hold the whole chain and to prepare firmly for the transition to the next link."

This situation could be brought into existence anywhere — at Corus, or in the car industry, or at Nortel where 2,000 redundancies have been announced. Go to where jobs are being lost, talk to the workers, collaborate and draft a leaflet, call a big meeting. Raise the experience of Visteon. Raise the possibility of direct action: it can be done!

- Solidarity to savevestas@googlemail.com
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